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INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0298  
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RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 1569  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 001509

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTERR](#) [CO](#)  
SUBJECT: NARCO INFIGHTING REEMERGES IN ANTIOQUIA AND CORDOBA

REF: A. BOGOTA 1443 B. BOGOTA 1136 C. BOGOTA 645

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer.  
Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: The Uraba region of Antioquia Department as well as Cordoba Department--both of which contain major narcotrafficking routes--are suffering a serious outbreak of narco-related violence. A fight between rival narcotrafficking groups has reportedly left 400 dead since January, with the violence also spilling into Medellin. President Uribe held a National Security Council meeting in Monteria on April 7 to highlight the problem, and the Colombian National Police (CNP) has set up a special unit to pursue Uraba-based narcotafficker and former paramilitary leader Daniel Rendon (Don Mario). Still, Colombian military note that Uraba is not a military priority, and military and police corruption is a serious problem. End Summary.

URABA AND CORDOBA: FERTILE GROUND FOR NARCOS  
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¶2. (U) The Uraba region of Antioquia Department and Cordoba Department in northwest Colombia remains a center of narcotrafficking. Paramilitary leader Carlos Castano set up his first paramilitary/narcotrafficking group in Cordoba and Uraba in the early 1990s. A CNP official told us Uraba's coastline, rivers, dense vegetation, hills, and border with Panama make it one of "the most secure routes for narcotrafficking." Its proximity to Medellin and coca cultivation in other parts of Antioquia--as well as the presence of large numbers of demobilized paramilitaries and mid-level para commanders--make it an integral part of a regional narcotrafficking economy. San Pedro de Uraba Mayor Hugo Caballero said Uraba's poor governance and lack of economic development also contribute to criminal activity. He characterized Uraba's infrastructure, public institutions and class structure as somewhere "between the 21st century and colonialism."

¶3. (U) The presence of substantial numbers of demobilized paramilitaries--coupled with coca cultivation in the south and access to the sea--also makes Cordoba an attractive area for new groups. Tierralta Mayor Anibal Ortiz Naranjo, claims the GOC has lost track of 600 of 825 former United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) members who demobilized in his community. (Note: Tierralta was largely controlled by paramilitaries from 1995 until the final para demobilization in 2006.) He said the GOC's local reintegration programs

stopped paying monthly stipends to demobilized in 2007, leading many to return to crime. President Uribe agrees the GOC's reintegration programs in Uraba and Cordoba have been ineffective.

#### NEW CRIMINAL GROUPS BATTLE FOR CONTROL

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¶4. (U) Daniel Rendon (Don Mario) -- a former mid-level United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) mid-level commander and brother of AUC Elmer Cardenas Block commander Freddy Rendon (El Aleman) -- heads an Uraba-based narcotrafficking band which is battling Medellin-based criminal groups such as Los Paisas and Los Traquetos for control of narcotrafficking activities in Uraba and Cordoba. The conflict began with individual murders, but has expanded into a full blown gang war. Media sources attribute over 400 murders in the region since January to the conflict, and violent crime in Cordoba reportedly has risen 37% in 2008 in the first quarter as compared to last year. Rendon, who demobilized under the paramilitary peace process but later returned to crime, is recruiting former demobilized paras into his ranks. Some media claim he has also sought the support of the FARC.

¶5. (C) CNP Carabineros (rural police) told us Rendon intends to dominate the Uraba/Cordoba region as well as to extend his operations into Medellin. His efforts are encountering resistance from Medellin-based narcotraffickers such as Carlos Mario Aguilar (Rogelio), a former lieutenant to AUC commander and long time narcotrafficker Diego Murillo (Don Berna). Medellin Secretary of Government Jesus Ramirez said a recent increase in murders in Medellin is a direct consequence of the violence in Uraba. Public Enterprises of Medellin President Federico Restrepo told us Medellin needs to take a more active role in promoting socio-economic development in Uraba if it is to solve its own narcotrafficking problems.

#### PRIMARILY A LAW ENFORCEMENT MATTER

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¶6. (U) In response to the growing violence, President Uribe held a National Security Council meeting--involving local officials, the CNP, intelligence agencies, and the military--in Monteria, Cordoba on April 7 to highlight the need for greater action against Rendon. He voiced frustration over the CNP's failed attempts to capture Rendon over the past two months and ordered the immediate creation of a special CNP 'Search Block' to pursue him. Reflecting the GOC's stance that the criminal groups that have emerged after the paramilitary demobilization are a criminal--not a national security threat, the CNP's Carabineros have the lead in the fight against Rendon's band as well as other new narcotrafficking groups.

¶7. (C) The CNP has scored recent successes against Rendon's group, including substantial arms seizures, but local government officials complain that the GOC response to date is insufficient. Some carabinero commanders agree that the permanent police presence needs to be increased in the region to cope with the growing threat. They also argue that the military should play a greater role. Still, General Saavedra, Director of Operations for the Colombian military, told us Uraba continues to be a low priority for the military, which is focused on the FARC's presence in Tolima, Meta, Guaviare, and the southern part of the country. Local authorities, civil society groups, and CNP officials recognize that narotraffickers' penetration of local government, the judiciary, and the security forces is a major obstacle to combating these groups (ref A).

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